LBJ Reacted Cautiously to Hanoi Move for Peace Talks

This is the 12th of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.

"IT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO"
[VIETNAM 1968-1969]
(Part One)

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 3, 1968, began like most days in the White House. I was up early and read through the morning papers over breakfast.

Senator Henry ("Scoop") Jackson of Washington came into my office with his wife and their two children, Anna and Peter. Peter was celebrating his second birthday. I gave the children gifts and the White House photographer took a birthday picture. At that moment, Tom Johnson rushed in from the Press Room with a piece of ticker copy in his hand. He handed it to George Christian, who passed it to me. It was a bulletin from Singapore reporting a Hanoi broadcast. It said, in effect: "Hanoi is ready to talk."

In minutes the Situation Room sent me the full text of Hanoi's statement. After a long preamble criticizing us bitterly, the Hanoi statement said:

> It is clear that the U.S. government had not correctly and fully responded to the just demand of the DRV government, of U.S. progressive opinion, and of world opinion. However, on its part, the DRV government declares its readiness to send its representatives to make contact with U.S. representatives to decide with the U.S. side the unconditional cessation of bombing and all other war acts against the DRV so that talks could begin.

Secretary Rusk was in New Zealand attending a meeting of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, so I asked George Christian to call Acting Secretary of State Katzenbach and Defense Secretary Clifford for their reactions.

"The first three-quarters of Hanoi's statement is the standard Communist attack on us," Katzenbach said. "But there is a more interesting and crucial part that follows." He believed that this key passage went "further perhaps than Hanoi has ever gone before."

"The President took the first step so that Hanoi could have an opportunity to take the next step," Clifford said. "Then the President could take a further step. This may be what Hanoi could have in mind. They seem to be responding to the President's initiative." We discussed this possibility for a while, then went on to other Cabinet business.

I had asked my principal foreign policy and military advisers to meet me for lunch after the Cabinet meeting. But several appointments intervened and we could not get together until after three o'clock. Except for Rusk, the "regulars" were all present—Clifford, Wheeler, Helms, Rostow and Katzenbach in place of Rusk. General Maxwell Taylor and Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy were also there, and I had asked Ambassadors Goldberg, Harriman, and Thompson to join us. Our main task was to decide how to reply to Hanoi's statement. Everyone present favored a positive response, but some wanted to go further than others. After hearing various points of view, I asked Katzenbach, Cliffords and Goldberg to go across the hall to the Treaty Room and draft a statement for our consideration.

"We have to prevent everybody from getting their hopes up too high," I warned. "We have to be aware that we're still far from peace." One adviser pointed out that "the debate in the Senate has been washed away by events." Another said: "Apparently it's easier to satisfy Ho Chi Minh than it is Fulbright." One adviser favored delaying any action until we had full agreement with the South Vietnamese and had consulted our other allies. "Let's not rush into this," he urged. "We are not rushing," I said. "But there are two things we have to do: One is to go out to (Ambassador) Bunker to explain what we are thinking; the other is to get out a positive statement now. I want to move, but I don't want to rush."

On the evening of April 3 I met in the Cabinet Room with congressional leaders from both parties to discuss the tax bill. During the meeting I received the draft of a message my advisers thought we should send immediately to Hanoi. The message said that we had read the North Vietnamese statement and would accept their proposal. Our representative, Averell Harriman, would be available immediately to meet their representative. We suggested they meet in Geneva on April 8. If that arrangement was not agreeable, we would accept "any reasonable alternative suggestions" by Hanoi regarding time and place.

What was Hanoi's official position? We decided the only way to find out was to ask. We also wanted Hanoi to understand our position clearly, so we prepared another message. We pointed out that it would be difficult for us to meet in Phnom Penh because we had no diplomatic relations with Cambodia and no Embassy or staff there. There would be many technical problems with communications and other facilities. We sent the message for delivery to the North Vietnames in Vientiane. But before it could be delivered, a "flash" message arrived from Ambassador Sullivan in Laos. A North Vietnamese diplomat had come to our Embassy and promised that his government would answer our proposal of April 4 that same afternoon. We stopped delivery of our second message until we learned what Hanoi had to say. Early the next morning, April 8, we had our answer. The North Vietnamese agreed to meetings at the ambassadorial level, but they were sticking to Phnom Penh as the site. They insisted it was an "appropriate" location. They did not mention Geneva or any other place, but their message left the door open for counterproposals.

At noon I met with Rusk, Clifford, and Rostow in the Cabinet Room. We studied Hanoi's reply word by word, line by line. Rusk said he thought the South Vietnamese would strongly prefer New Delhi as the site for contacts, and there was also a good case for Rangoon. We all considered it preferable to hold the talks in Asia, assuming that Hanoi would not accept Geneva. Clifford reminded me that I and others had frequently said we would meet "anywhere, anytime."

"We have to assume that there is drinking water there, don't we?" I said. You can't hold a formal international conference on a desert or a mountaintop. Both sides need housing and other facilities. The conferees have to be able to communicate quickly and securely with their home governments."

On the evening of April 8 I flew by helicopter to Camp David.

The next morning, I drove to the helicopter pad to greet my visitors from Washington. Ambassador Bunker had just arrived from Saigon. Rusk, Clifford, and Wheeler completed the group.

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